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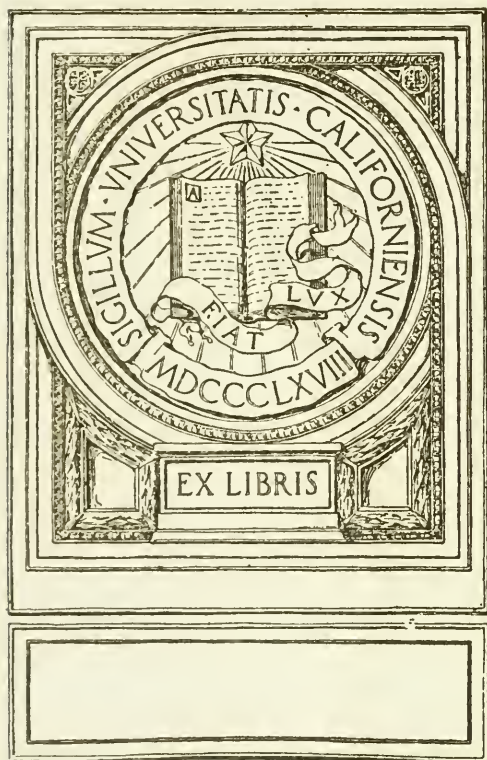
BY
HENRY KINGSLEY

ILLUSTRATED
BY L. FRÖLICH



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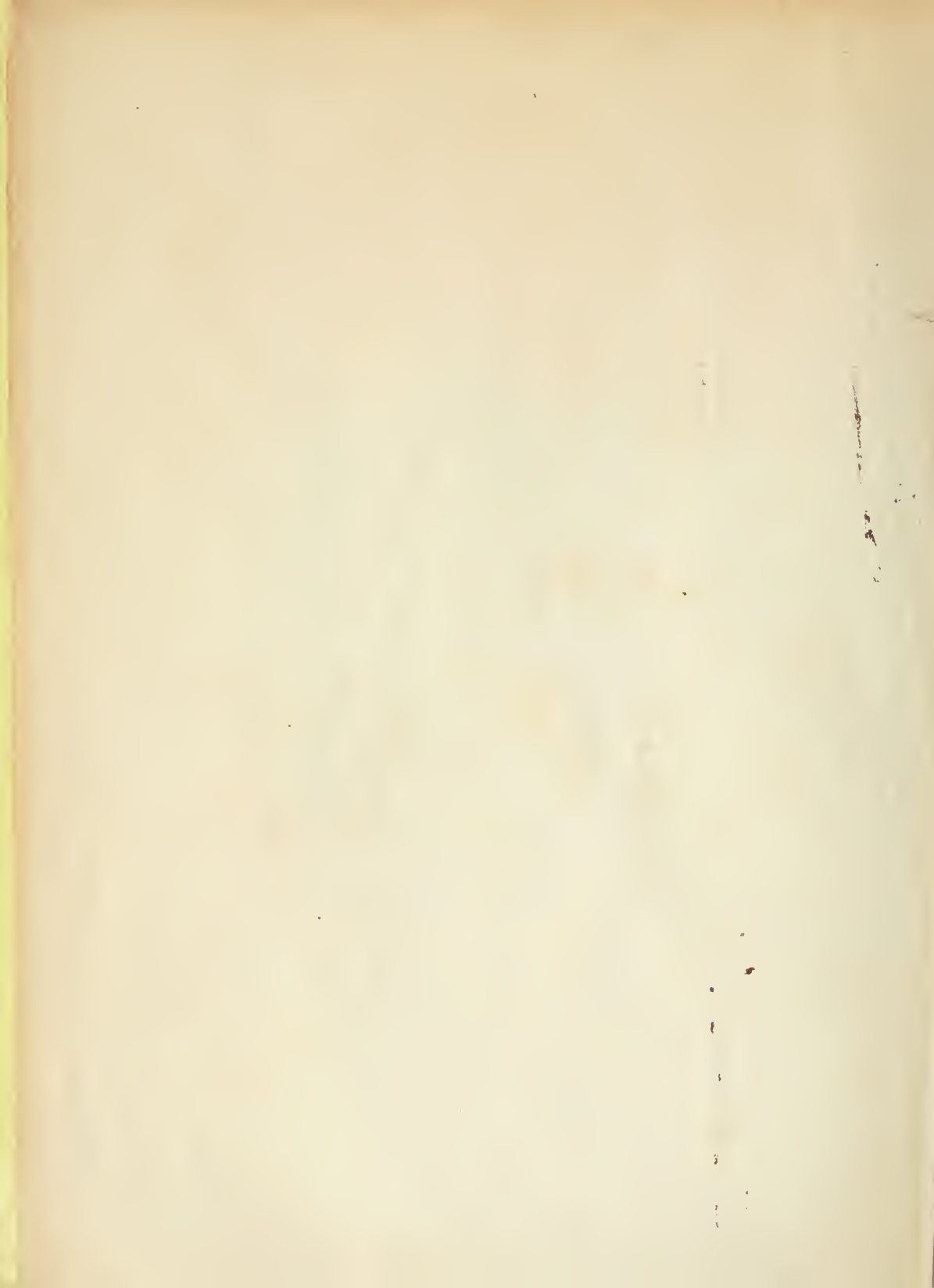
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Letter to William Byrd.

from his long Brother.

June 20 1780

THE LOST CHILD.







"Looking eagerly across the water."

FRONT.

THE LOST CHILD.

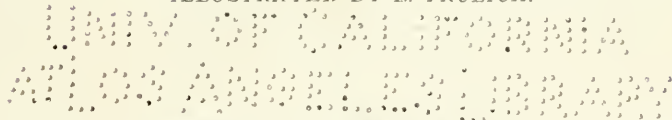
BY

HENRY KINGSLEY.



"And there he stood, naked and free, on the forbidden ground."

ILLUSTRATED BY L. FRÖLICH.



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PREFACE.

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Baker

It is only natural that an author should say a few words about a republication of this kind. The story in its separate form has the advantage of being illustrated by an eminent artist, whose special qualifications are widely known and acknowledged; and it seemed to all concerned best that it should be left entirely untouched. The first two paragraphs and the last short one are simply added: no other liberty has been taken with it.

To avoid the trouble of those great plagues of literature, foot-notes, the author asks the reader to submit to a few very trifling explanations:

“Quantongs” are a bush fruit, of about

the same quality as green gooseberries, but, like the last-named fruit, very much sought after by the native youth.

The Bunyip is the native river devil, or kelpie, evidently the crocodile of the Northern Australian rivers, whose recognition by the Southern natives in their legends shows, if nothing else did, that the centre of dispersion in Australia was from the North, as Doctor Laing told us years ago.

With regard to the habit which lost children have of aimless climbing, the author knew a child who, being lost by his father while out shooting on one of the flats bordering on the Eastern Pyrenees in Port Phillip on Sunday afternoon, was found the next Wednesday dead, at an elevation above the Avoca township of between two and three thousand feet.

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THE LOST CHILD.

REMEMBER? Yes, I remember well that time when the disagreement arose between Sam Buckley and Cecil, and how it was mended. You are wrong about one thing, General; no words ever passed between those two young men: death was between them before they had time to speak.

I will tell you the real story, old as I am, as well as either of them could tell it for themselves; and as I tell it I hear the familiar roar of the old snowy river in my ears, and if I shut my eyes I can see the great mountain, Lanyngerin, bending down his head like a thorough-bred horse with a curb

in his mouth ; I can see the long grey plains, broken with the outlines of the solitary volcanoes Widderin and Monmot. Ah, General Halbert ! I will go back there next year, for I am tired of England, and I will leave my bones there ; I am getting old, and I want peace, as I had it in Australia. As for the story you speak of, it is simply this :—

Four or five miles up the river from Garoopna stood a solitary hut, sheltered by a lofty bare knoll, round which the great river chafed among the boulders. Across the stream was the forest sloping down in pleasant glades from the mountain ; and behind the hut rose the plain four or five hundred feet overhead, seeming to be held aloft by the blue-stone columns which rose from the river-side.

In this cottage resided a shepherd, his wife, and one little boy, their son, about eight years old,—a strange, wild little bush child, able to speak articulately, but utterly without knowledge or experience of human creatures, save of his father and mother; unable to read a line; without religion of any sort or kind; as entire a little savage, in fact, as you could find in the worst den in your city, morally speaking, and yet beautiful to look on; as active as a roe, and, with regard to natural objects, as fearless as a lion.

As yet unfit to begin labour; all the long summer he would wander about the river bank, up and down the beautiful rock-walled paradise where he was confined, sometimes looking eagerly across the water at the waving forest boughs, and fancying he could

see other children far up the vistas beckoning to him to cross and play in that merry land of shifting lights and shadows.

It grew quite into a passion with the poor little man to get across and play there; and one day when his mother was shifting the hurdles, and he was handing her the strips of green hide which bound them together, he said to her,—

“Mother, what country is that across the river?”

“The forest, child.”

“There’s plenty of quantongs over there, eh, mother, and raspberries? Why mayn’t I get across and play there?”

“The river is too deep, child, and the Bunyip lives in the water under the stones.”



"Mother, what country is that across the river?"



“Who are the children that play across there?”

“Black children, likely.”

“No white children?”

“Pixies; don’t go near ’em, child; they’ll lure you on, Lord knows where. Don’t get trying to cross the river, now, or you’ll be drowned.”

But next day the passion was stronger on him than ever. Quite early on the glorious cloudless midsummer day he was down by the river-side, sitting on a rock, with his shoes and stockings off, paddling his feet in the clear tepid water, and watching the million fish in the shallows—black fish and grayling—leaping and flashing in the sun.

There is no pleasure that I have ever experienced like a child’s midsummer holiday,—the time, I mean, when two

or three of us used to go away up the brook, and take our dinners with us, and come home at night tired, dirty, happy, scratched beyond recognition, with a great nosegay, three little trout and one shoe, the other having been used for a boat till it had gone down with all hands out of soundings. How poor our Derby days, our Greenwich dinners, our evening parties, where there are plenty of nice girls, are, after that! Depend on it, a man never experiences such pleasure or grief after fourteen as he does before: unless in some cases in his first love-making, when the sensation is new to him.

But, meanwhile, there sat our child, barelegged, watching the forbidden ground beyond the river. A fresh breeze was moving the trees, and making the whole a dazzling mass of

shifting light and shadow. He sat so still that a glorious violet and red kingfisher perched quite close, and, dashing into the water, came forth with a fish, and fled like a ray of light along the winding of the river. A colony of little shell parrots, too, crowded on a bough, and twittered and ran to and fro quite busily, as though they said to him, "We don't mind you, my dear; you are quite one of us."

Never was the river so low. He stepped in; it scarcely reached his ankle. Now surely he might get across. He stripped himself, and, carrying his clothes, waded through, the water never reaching his middle, all across the long, yellow gravelly shallow. And there he stood, naked and free, on the forbidden ground.

He quickly dressed himself, and began examining his new kingdom, rich beyond his utmost hopes. Such quantongs, such raspberries, surpassing imagination; and when tired of them, such fern boughs, six or eight feet long! He would penetrate this region, and see how far it extended.

What tales he would have for his father to-night! He would bring him here, and show him all the wonders, and perhaps he would build a new hut over here, and come and live in it? Perhaps the pretty young lady, with the feathers in her hat, lived somewhere here, too?

There! There is one of those children he has seen before across the river. Ah! ah! it is not a child at all, but a pretty grey beast, with big ears. A kangaroo, my lad; he won't



"A Kangaroo! A Snake! An Eagle!"

play with you, but skips away slowly, and leaves you alone.

There is something like the gleam of water on that rock. A snake! Now a sounding rush through the wood, and a passing shadow. An eagle! He brushes so close to the child, that he strikes at the bird with a stick, and then watches him as he shoots up like a rocket, and, measuring the fields of air in ever-widening circles, hangs like a motionless speck upon the sky; though, measure his wings across, and you will find he is nearer fifteen feet than fourteen.

Here is a prize, though! A wee little native bear, barely a foot long,—a little grey beast, comical beyond expression, with broad flapped ears,—sits on a tree within reach. He makes no resistance, but cuddles into

the child's bosom, and eats a leaf as they go along; while his mother sits aloft, and grunts indignant at the abstraction of her offspring, but, on the whole, takes it pretty comfortably, and goes on with her dinner of peppermint leaves.

What a short day it has been! Here is the sun getting low, and the magpies and jackasses beginning to tune up before roosting.

He would turn and go back to the river. Alas! which way?

He was lost in the bush. He turned back and went, as he thought, the way he had come, but soon arrived at a tall, precipitous cliff, which, by some infernal magic, seemed to have got between him and the river. Then he broke down, and that strange madness came on him which comes even



He was lost in the Bush.

on strong men when lost in the forest ; a despair, a confusion of intellect, which has cost many a man his life. Think what it must be with a child !

He was fully persuaded that the cliff was between him and home, and that he must climb it. Alas ! every step he took aloft carried him further from the river and the hope of safety ; and when he came to the top, just at dark, he saw nothing but cliff after cliff, range after range, all around him. He had been wandering through steep gullies all day unconsciously, and had penetrated far into the mountains. Night was coming down, still and crystal clear, and the poor little lad was far away from help or hope, going his last long journey alone.

Partly perhaps walking, and partly sitting down and weeping, he got

through the night; and when the solemn morning came up, again he was still tottering along the leading range, bewildered; crying, from time to time, "Mother, mother!" still nursing his little bear, his only companion, to his bosom, and holding still in his hand a few poor flowers he had gathered the day before. Up and on all day, and at evening, passing out of the great zone of timber, he came on the bald, thunder-smitten summit ridge, where one ruined tree held up its skeleton arms against the sunset, and the wind came keen and frosty. So, with failing, feeble legs, upward still, towards the region of the granite and the snow; towards the eyrie of the kite and the eagle.

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He came on the bald, thunder-smitten summit ridge.

Brisk as they all were at Garoopna, none were so brisk as Cecil and Sam. Charles Hawker wanted to come with them, but Sam asked him to go with Jim; and, long before the others were ready, our two had strapped their blankets to their saddles, and followed by Sam's dog Rover, now getting a little grey about the nose, cantered off up the river.

Neither spoke at first. They knew what a solemn task they had before them; and, while acting as though everything depended on speed, guessed well that their search was only for a little corpse, which, if they had luck, they would find stiff and cold under some tree or cray.

Cecil began: "Sam, depend on it that child has crossed the river to this side. If he had been on the plains,

he would have been seen from a distance in a few hours."

"I quite agree," said Sam. "Let us go down on this side till we are opposite the hut, and search for marks by the river-side."

So they agreed; and in half an hour were opposite the hut, and, riding across to it to ask a few questions, found the poor mother sitting on the door-step, with her apron over her head, rocking herself to and fro.

"We have come to help you, mistress," said Sam. "How do you think he is gone?"

She said, with frequent bursts of grief, that "some days before he had mentioned having seen white children across the water, who beckoned him to cross and play; that she, knowing well that they were fairies, or perhaps



"We have come to help you, Mistress."



worse, had warned him solemnly not to mind them ; but that she had very little doubt that they had helped him over and carried him away to the forest ; and that her husband would not believe in his having crossed the river."

"Why, it is not knee-deep across the shallow," said Cecil.

"Let us cross again," said Sam: "he *may* be drowned, but I don't think it."

In a quarter of an hour from starting they found, slightly up the stream, one of the child's socks, which in his hurry to dress he had forgotten. Here brave Rover took up the trail like a blood-hound, and before evening stopped at the foot of a lofty cliff.

"Can he have gone up here?" said Sam, as they were brought up by the rock.

"Most likely," said Cecil. "Lost

children always climb from height to height. I have heard it often remarked by old bush hands. Why they do so, God, who leads them, only knows ; but the fact is beyond denial. Ask Rover what he thinks ? ”

The brave old dog was half-way up, looking back for them. It took them nearly till dark to get their horses up ; and, as there was no moon, and the way was getting perilous, they determined to camp, and start again in the morning.

They spread their blankets and lay down side by side. Sam had thought, from Cecil's proposing to come with him in preference to the others, that he would speak of a subject nearly concerning them both ; but Cecil went off to sleep and made no sign ; and Sam, ere he dozed, said to himself,

“If he don’t speak this journey, I will. It is unbearable that we should not come to some understanding. Poor Cecil!”

At early dawn they caught up their horses, which had been hobbled with the stirrup leathers, and started afresh. Both were more silent than ever, and the dog, with his nose to the ground, led them slowly along the rocky rib of the mountain, ever going higher and higher.

“It is inconceivable,” said Sam, “that the poor child can have come up here. There is Tuckerimbid close to our right, five thousand feet above the river. Don’t you think we must be mistaken?”

“The dog disagrees with you,” said Cecil. “He has something before him not very far off. Watch him.”

The trees had become dwarfed and scattered; they were getting out of the region of trees; the real forest zone was now below them, and they saw they were emerging towards a bald elevated down, and that a few hundred yards before them was a dead tree, on the highest branch of which sat an eagle.

“The dog has stopped,” said Cecil; “the end is near.”

“See,” said Sam, “there is a handkerchief under the tree.”

“That is the boy himself,” said Cecil.

They were up to him and off in a moment. There he lay, dead and stiff, one hand still grasping the flowers he had gathered on his last happy play-day, and the other laid as a pillow, between the soft cold cheek and the



There he lay, dead and stiff.



rough cold stone. His midsummer holiday was over, his long journey was ended. He had found out at last what lay beyond the shining river he had watched so long.

That is the whole story, General Halbert; and who should know it better than I, Geoffry Hamlyn?

THE END.

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